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ABSTRACT

This study collected and described the verbal comments made during 102 editions of ESPN's Sportscenter, a sports news program. Comments made by the programs anchors, news journalists, players, coaches, owners, etc., believed to potentially convey to viewers what was normative or inappropriate behavior for sports participants, were recorded. A total of 1,706 comments were recorded, with an average of 17 comments per program. Comments used in this study pertained to sportsmanship (good and bad), fights/battery (punches, pushes, and fights), and immoral behavior (violation of laws or NCAA rules) taking place within the sports setting that were prohibited by game rules. Of the 1,706 comments, 355 fell within those categories. Data analysis indicated that sport as presented on Sportscenter was rife with poor sportsmanship, violence, and immoral behavior. Of the 355 comments, 352 were negative. Good sportsmanship and acts considered to be morally uplifting were rarely commented on. (Contains 14 references.) (SM)

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One Hundred and Two Days of Sportscenter: Messages of Poor Sportsmanship, Violence and Immorality

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Abstract

Televised sports programming may have an affect upon the behaviors of coaches and participants in sports settings. The purpose of this study was to collect and describe the verbal comments made during one hundred and two editions of ESPN's Sportscenter. Verbal comments regarding Sportsmanship, Violence within the sport setting (Fighting/Battery), and Morality were collected (N = 355) and discussed. Sport as presented on Sportscenter was rife with poor sportsmanship, violence and immoral behavior. Good sportsmanship, and acts considered to be morally uplifting were rarely commented on. Sportscenter telecasts would do little to lessen the incidence of bad sportsmanship, violence or immoral behavior currently associated with modern American sport and instead, may lead to an increased frequency of such behavior.

One Hundred and Two Days of ESPN's Sportscenter: Messages of Poor Sportsmanship, Violence and Immorality

Many Americans consider themselves sports fans. They may choose to follow sport by attending events in person, or through the mass media. Individuals that desire to follow a large number of teams and a wide variety of sports, while receiving in-depth coverage, may choose to watch televised sports news programs.

ESPN presents a nightly sports news program known as Sportscenter. The broadcast lasts 60 minutes and includes regular commercial interruptions. On Monday through Friday mornings, a tape delayed broadcast of the previous evening's final program is shown several times. ESPN, the network which produces Sportscenter reaches over 63 million American homes (Eitzen & Sage, 1997).

When individuals view sports programming, they observe events and listen to descriptions of those events. What viewers see and hear is believed to affect their perception of what actions are appropriate in athletic settings. Television, for example, is believed to foster violence in sport because sportscasters replay and praise violent activity (Bryant, 1989). As a result, televised sports news programming, such as Sportscenter may affect the behaviors of viewers as they coach and compete in youth, high school, collegiate and professional sports. The purpose of this

study was to record and analyze the comments made during Sportscenter which may have an affect upon sportsmanship, the occurrence of violent acts and the morality of athletes and coaches.

Procedure

One hundred and two editions of ESPN's Sportscenter were viewed on tape delay between January, 1996 and June, 1996. Comments made by the program's anchors, news journalists, players, coaches, owners, etc., believed to potentially convey to viewers what was normative or inappropriate behavior for sports participants were recorded. Routine reporting of scores or descriptions of standard play was not recorded. Commercials, though they did contain messages, were not evaluated. Notes were not made regarding information gained visually, unless comment was made by an individual regarding the behavior.

One thousand seven hundred and six comments were recorded. The average number of comments recorded per program was seventeen. Notation was also made regarding who made the comment (sports journalist, player, coach, other), what sport was involved (football, basketball, baseball, boxing, hockey, soccer, tennis, golf, swimming), and what level the sport was played at (professional or collegiate).

Results and Discussion

Comments recorded and presented within this paper included those related to Sportsmanship (good and bad), Immoral Behavior (violation of laws or NCAA rules) and Fights/Battery (punches, pushes and fights) taking place within the sports setting prohibited by game rules. Of the one thousand seven hundred and six comments recorded during the course of the study, three hundred and fifty-five(21%) fell within these three categories. Agreement percentages for Intra-rater reliability was 100% for comments in all three categories. Inter-rater agreement percentages were 98%, 100% and 100% for Sportsmanship, Fights/Battery and Immoral Behavior categories respectively.

Sportsmanship

A sportsman is one who is fair, generous, a good loser and a good winner (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1988). Sportsmanship is defined as conduct becoming to a sportsman. Comments made in response to coaches and athletes engaging in arguments with or yelling at officials, the awarding of technical fouls for unsporting behavior, the throwing or destruction of equipment after plays, ejection from contests for behavior, taunting and trash talking were categorized as examples of bad sportsmanship.

Some sports observers consider intentional fouls as unsportsmanlike acts (Fraleigh, 1982), but because they are

accepted as convention by coaches, athletes and spectators, they were not recorded or discussed in the present study. Pushing, throwing punches and fighting may also be considered by some to be unsportsmanlike. These acts are discussed separately under the section Fights/Battery. Fan behavior is not discussed in this paper.

Good sportsmanship was rarely commented on during Sportscenter. Only three comments regarding acts of good sportsmanship were recorded. In one, a professional basketball player helped an opponent before a game with his shot. The second, involved a collegiate basketball player telling a teammate to stop talking trash. The third involved a professional coach apologizing for running up the score on an opponent.

Anchors made comments reflective of bad sportsmanship or comment was made regarding examples of bad sportsmanship exhibited by athletes or coaches one hundred and forty-two times. On the average, there was one mention of bad sportsmanship made per telecast. A total of thirty-five editions of Sportscenter were watched in which no mention was made of an unsporting act. Table 1 presents a breakdown of the unsportsman-like acts commented upon during data collection.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Players were over twice as likely (N = 86) to engage in acts of bad sportsmanship during games which were commented upon than were coaches (N = 42). However, when one considers the ratio of coaches to players, the frequency of bad sportsmanship displayed by coaches was alarmingly high.

Some observers would consider criticizing officials as unsportsmanlike. Hilliard (1994) found that NBC's coverage of the 1992 Olympics included criticism of officials in several sports. In the present study, officials were second guessed and/or criticized on twenty-eight occasions (14 times by journalists, 9 times by athletes and 4 times by coaches). This was an average of once every four days. Negative comments made regarding officials brought into question their professionalism, credibility and integrity. No positive comments were made concerning officials or their performance over the course of this study.

Coaches and athletes at all levels of play may be seen yelling at officials. They often receive technical fouls, cautions and ejections. Since this behavior may be observed regularly on television programs such as Sportscenter and the anchors comment on the actions, perhaps it is deemed acceptable behavior by coaches and players. Indeed, the idea of "working the referees" in order to get calls that will favor your team is a commonly accepted practice among

high school and college coaches. Many coaches believe that "working the refs" is a part of their job. These coaches are either unconcerned with modeling good sportsmanship, or they do not believe that questioning officials is unsportsmanlike.

Examples of bad sportsmanship were much more frequent at the professional level (N = 114) than they were at the collegiate level (N = 17). These results may be explained by the fact that professional players and coaches make their living through their participation in sport. Continued employment and pay increases are dependent upon success. College coaches also make their living in sport and the outcome of contests would be important to them as well. This may explain why the occurrences of poor sportsmanship displayed by coaches (N = 14) at the collegiate level were much higher than for those of collegiate players (N = 3).

For individuals making their living in the sports arena, sport is not a game. It is not a pleasant diversion. It is a business in which production and success are necessary for continued employment. Perhaps in such an environment, it is unreasonable to expect participants to be fair and generous as they participate. Winning and losing with a spirit of graciousness would seem irrelevant, though it may be a nice facade. In the eyes of many coaches and fans, when athletes do not display disappointment and/or

anger after a poor performance or loss, it is perceived as a sign that they have not participated with the appropriate level of seriousness.

If television programs such as Sportscenter and other forms of the media do not present alternatives to the professionalized sports model, how are children to learn to participate with a spirit of sportsmanship? How will coaches grow to expect good sportsmanship from their athletes? If success is the ultimate goal, it may be unreasonable to expect that they will.

In summary, examples of good sportsmanship were rare on the Sportscenter telecasts viewed for this study. Conversely, bad sportsmanship was often brought to the attention of viewers. Officials were questioned on a regular basis and commented upon unfavorably. Based upon the results of this study, if Sportscenter has an affect upon sportsmanship, it would appear to be negative.

Fights/Battery

Violence in American sport reflects the violence commonly occurring within American society (Schneider & Eitzen, 1987). Incidents of fighting between two or more individuals and battery were frequently commented upon during Sportscenter telecasts (N = 116). There was on the average one fight or battery commented upon each day. On

forty-three of the one hundred and two telecasts viewed for this study, no fights or assaults were commented upon.

If sport is a microcosm of society, violence would be expected to take place in the sport environment. Indeed, if violence (fighting/battery) was not commonly observed in American Sport, it would be an anomaly (Eitzen & Sage, 1997).

Table 2 presents a breakdown of the fights and batteries commented upon during Sportscenter telecasts. Fights and battery taking place outside of the sports setting are included and discussed in the section of this paper entitled Immoral Behavior. Battery in a basketball game may not lead to an arrest and trial. However, an athlete who punches someone at a bar is likely to be arrested. Some observers believe that fights occurring in sports arenas are not like "real" fights. Indeed, violence in the sport setting has never been looked at as real violence (Smith, 1996).

Insert Table 2 about here

Most notable was the high frequency of fights commented on during coverage of hockey games (N = 54). Incidents of fighting or battery were commented on forty- three times during coverage of professional basketball games. Fighting

and battery were mentioned relatively infrequently during coverage of other sports on Sportscenter.

Considering the fact that fights/batteries were commented on in hockey games fifty-four times, it was surprising to find only five examples of bad sportsmanship commented on during hockey coverage. It is possible that the sportscasters chose not to comment upon "minor" incidents such as players and coaches yelling at referees when instead, they could show a fight. Perhaps showing fights and commenting on them was believed to increase ratings.

Comments were often made (N = 19) after the fight, push or punch that made light of the incident, or which seemed to condone it. Examples are presented in Table 3. When sportscasters make light of violent behavior, it may lead to an increased number of batteries and fights within the sport setting (Bryant, 1989).

Insert Table 3 about here

Battery of officials by athletes was reported on during Sportscenter telecasts twenty-one times. Four professional basketball players pushed or head butted officials on different occasions. These four incidents were mentioned on

twenty occasions. One incident was mentioned in which a college hockey team attacked a referee.

In summary, fights and batteries were often commented on over the course of this study. The high number of fights and batteries covered on programs such as Sportscenter may make it appear to viewers that fighting and battery are a normal part of modern sport. Accordingly, a high incidence of fighting and battery could be expected in sport at all levels as a result of cultural patterning (Leonard, 1993). If Sportscenter regularly features fistfights and batteries and announcers are heard to make light of them, the program would do little to impede the spread of violence in American Sport.

Immoral Behavior

American citizens are expected to follow the laws of the nation, states and municipalities. Member institutions within the NCAA and the athletes representing these institutions are expected to follow NCAA rules. Breaking laws and rules may be considered breaches of morality.

In this study, law breaking behavior outside of the athletic arena and violations of NCAA rules which were commented on during Sportscenter were categorized as immoral behavior. There were frequent breeches of morality commented upon during the course of this study (N = 98). An average of one immoral act was commented on per day. Within

Table 4 and Table 5 are presented breakdowns of the immoral behavior commented upon during the Sportscenter programs studied.

Insert Tables 4 and 5 about here

Players accounted for eighty-two of the immoral acts commented upon, while coaches accounted for fifteen. The use of ineligible players in NCAA contests was attributed to college coaches. This type of infraction was mentioned five times during data collection. Otherwise, coaches were rarely reported to be immoral in their behavior (N = 10). Perhaps this is because coaches are frequently conservative and are generally representative of main stream American values (Kenyon, 1965).

When individuals were reported to engage in immoral behavior, the incident was often reported on several telecasts and sometimes more than once within the same telecast. Sixty-six immoral acts actually took place. For example, Michael Irvin's cocaine arrest was mentioned eight times. Events such as this must have been deemed important enough to follow up on over a course of days due to perceived viewer interest.

The number of reports of bad sportsmanship were few for professional and college football. In-contest batteries and

fights were non existent for football during the course of this study. Data collection was conducted during the last three weeks of the professional football season and the college season had ended before data collection was begun. Few games were covered. However, the number of football-related comments regarding immoral behavior was high (N = 49).

It has often been said that sport gives people something to do that can keep them out of trouble (Coakley, 1994). Perhaps the idle time afforded professional and collegiate football players resulted in their immoral behavior. The findings of this study do little to support the contention, however, that sport teaches players values, that individuals enhance their character as a result of the sport experience, or that participation in sport will discourage deviant behavior.

Basketball players, who were in season at the time of the study, were much less frequently reported to have engaged in immoral behavior (N = 23). Ten of the incidents reported involved NCAA rules violations. As noted above, it is possible that basketball players and coaches were very busy with their sport participation, and as a result were less likely to engage in deviant behavior.

Sportscenter anchors frequently commented upon immoral behavior during data collection for this study.

Surprisingly, there were no comments made during the study which indicated that athletes and coaches engaged in behavior which was morally uplifting.

After reflecting upon the data for analysis, the researcher could not recall any of the bad sportsmanship, violent behavior or immoral activity reported on Sportscenter to have involved female athletes or coaches. There are two factors which may have worked to inhibit the reporting of such activity involving females.

Women's sporting activity was rarely presented on Sportscenter. This was not surprising. Television has been found to allocate only 5% of its coverage of sport to female athletes (Wilson, 1990). The media gives viewers and readers what it believes the public wants. This results in almost all coverage being given to men's sporting activity (Theberge & Cronk, 1986). Limited coverage of women's sport would result in little acknowledgment of the engagement of females in violence, immoral behavior or poor sportsmanship.

In North America, gender stratification has been said to exist (Macionis, 1993). Males have had more prestige, power and economic privilege than have women. Sports have served as a means to prepare young boys to function in this social milieu. In sport it was viewed as appropriate for males to be competitive, aggressive, ambitious, tough, risk takers and dominating (Nixon and Frey, 1996). Violence and

poor sportsmanship might come to be expected as boys/men participated in sports with these attitudes. The behaviors would be looked at as boys just being boys.

Women, until relatively recently, were excluded from this male domain and were generally socialized to be supportive, passive and care-givers (Leonard, 1993). If such traditional expectations are held for modern females, it is possible that the Sportscenter producers felt it inappropriate to broadcast footage or to report on female athletes engaging in behavior which has traditionally been viewed as unfeminine (acting assertively, fighting and engaging in immoral behavior). By not presenting alternative female behavior, Sportscenter served to support the status-quo.

This study was conducted in order to determine what messages ESPN's Sportscenter had for viewers concerning sportsmanship, violence and morality. It was not conducted to look for problems but simply to record what comments were being made and to describe them.

The results were disturbing. Of three hundred and fifty five comments recorded, three hundred and fifty two were negative. The comments made during Sportscenter telecasts portrayed the sports environment to be one in which bad sportsmanship, fighting/battery and immoral behavior are commonplace.

The media is said to serve the following functions in American society: to entertain, to inform, to integrate and to act as an agent of social change (Eitzen & Sage, 1997). There is little doubt that Sportscenter is entertaining. The highlights and commentary are interesting to sports fans. If programming such as Sportscenter informs, it tells viewers that sport is rife with violence, that participants frequently engage in immoral behavior and that sportsmanship is almost nonexistent. If it serves to integrate and bring about change, the negative aspects of sport may be expected to become more frequently observed at all levels of play in America.

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Table 1

Examples of Bad Sportsmanship Commented Upon

Total Player Incidents Commented Upon	85
Professional Player Incidents	83
Collegiate Player Incidents	3
Total Coaching Incidents	42
Professional Coach Incidents	28
Collegiate Coach Incidents	14
Journalist Negative Comments About Officials	14
*Incidents Commented on By Sport	
Professional Basketball	54
Collegiate Basketball	28
Professional Baseball	34
Professional Tennis	6
Professional Football	1
Professional Hockey	5
TOTAL	128

* Does not include negative journalistic comments regarding officials and their performance.

Table 2

Frequency of Fights/Batteries Commented on By Sport and Type

Professional Hockey	
Player vs. Player	52
Official vs. Player	1
*Players vs. Official	1
Professional Basketball	
Player vs. Player	23
Player vs. Official	20
College Basketball	
Player vs. Player	9
Professional Baseball	
Player vs. Player	7
Other Sports (3)	
Player vs. Player (1 each)	3
TOTAL	116

* College Incident

Table 3

Examples of Comments Recorded Which Condone Fights/Assaults

1. "It's part of the game, you may as well enjoy it."
2. "It was testosterone night."
3. "I think the sport translates to T.V."
4. "And he gives him a knuckle sandwich."
5. "He won 26 punches to 20."
6. "Can you say deviated Septum?"
7. "Expect civilized violence on ESPN."

Table 4

Immoral Activity Commented on By Behavior

Behavior	Frequency of Mention	Actual Number of Events
Assault/Battery	14	11
Drugs/DWI	30	17
NCAA/NFL Rules Broken		
Players	11	8
Coaches	7	6
Sexual Assault/Rape	13	7
Gambling/Gaming	5	3
Murder/Manslaughter	5	3
NASCAR Rules Broken	3	3
Tax Evasion	3	2
Robbery/Theft	2	2
Urination in Public	1	1
Child Support/Non-Pay	1	1
Promiscuity	1	1
Profanity by a Coach	1	1
TOTAL	97	66

Table 5

Immoral Behavior By Sport

Sport	Player	Coaches	Total
Professional Football	35	1	36
College Basketball	15	9	24
College Football	12	1	13
Professional Baseball	8	1	9
Professional Boxing	5	0	5
Professional Basketball	4	0	4
NASCAR Racing	0	3	3
Professional Tennis	2	0	2
Swimming	1	0	1
TOTAL	82	15	98